The town of Elkford, BC is the highest town in British Columbia, sitting at 1300 metres above sea level. With a current population of just over 2500 people, this resource community is not large, yet it is within an hour’s drive of five large coal mines. Elkford was incorporated in 1971 to support the newly opened mine, Fording Coal Ltd.

The median age of Elkford’s population is significantly lower than the rest of the East Kootenay Region, characterized by a booming population of children under 15, more residents in their working years, and less than the BC average of people aged 65+. Currently we are seeing an influx of younger families moving to Elkford as the mineworkers retire and move away.

Due to the severe winters Elkford experiences, winter programs at the library are much more successful than summer programming. In the winter, the library provides a “Coffee Break” on Saturday afternoons for those who are feeling housebound, as well as children’s programming and partnerships with the local elementary school and the local youth network. During the summer most community members take advantage of the long clear days to spend their time outdoors, hiking, biking or travelling. Elkford empties during the summer holidays, as community members go camping or spend time at one of the many lakes in the area.

In the spring of 2018, the Elkford Public Library Board implemented a new strategic plan that aligned with the Provincial strategic priorities. Our guiding principles include: safe and equitable access for all, free exchange of information and ideas, fostering learning, valuing teamwork and partnerships, expecting respect for all users, and encouraging participation and being open, transparent and honest. Some of our goals for 2018 included promoting the library, updating technology, providing staff training, collaborating with community groups, providing increased programming, and working more closely with the local schools. We have met most of our strategic goals for this first year and will continue implementing these strategies in 2019.

As well as the new strategic plan, the library had a complete turnover in staff, from the Director to both library clerks to our casual clerk, as well as a nearly new Library Board in that started in April. There have been many challenges as everybody, both staff and Library Board, have had to learn new skills and make new priorities.

Looking back over the last year, this group has become a wonderfully cohesive team with many new ideas for the library and we are forging ahead into 2019 with energy and enthusiasm.

LIBRARY PRIORITY 1  
**FOSTERING EQUITABLE ACCESS TO INFORMATION AND SERVICES**

1. Explore opportunities to provide open and wider access to a core suite of digital resources and provincial digital library initiatives.
The Elkford Public Library continued to promote our online databases and digital resources such as Pronunciator, RB Digital, eBooks, the Elkford Focus and community information. As in other years, interest in online language learning has remained steady, while patrons who download eBooks increase incrementally each year. This year we subscribed to Gale Courses and by year-end, 12 people were taking courses or had completed them, ranging from Quickbooks to photography to creative writing. Although 12 people may not seem like a lot, in a small isolated community like Elkford, Gale Courses is a significant educational opportunity for those who are unable to take courses any other way, whether because of cost or distance.

2. Explore opportunities to bring affordable high-speed broadband to every public library.

According to the 2018 BC Public Library Connectivity Survey Report & Analysis, Elkford is connected quite well. We rarely have delays in our internet connections, and we are not much slower than many bigger centres. Despite that, we plan to upgrade our network and replace our aging server in early 2019. Because of increased usage of the public computers to complete mine safety courses and to upgrade resumes and job applications, the library has applied for a grant to upgrade our computers to increase speed and efficiency.

3. Identifying under-served communities and address service gaps.

Knowledgeable library staff spend two to three hours a week helping people use the public computers or showing them how to set up email or find information. Both library clerks have spent many hours learning how to help patrons with computer issues. We had hoped to have a specific technology inspired time for this, but so far, our patrons prefer to access help on an as-needed basis.

We have also become the local copy centre, as we are one of the few places in the community where the public has access to a photocopier and staff who know how to use it. Staff also assist patrons with writing resumes (we are always willing to proofread), finding online information, and helping patrons complete mine safety courses.

LIBRARY PRIORITY 2  DEVELOPING SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE

1. Supporting libraries as learning organizations, which encourage innovation.

Over the last year, the Elkford Public Library has collaborated with our local youth network, SYS.tem, to provide space for their 3D printer. Every week we have a volunteer high school student come in to show other teens how to use the printer. Generally, we have one or two interested students each week.

We have also collaborated with SYS.tem to provide a homework club that is still getting off the ground.

Finally, the Elkford Public Library is a significant field trip stop for the elementary school. In the spring we had two primary classes, with about 22 students each visit the library for a tour. We also had one intermediate class come for a tour. We tailor the tours to the needs and learning level of each class. The primary grades do a scavenger hunt after a quick tour of the library, while the intermediate group was
expected to show how to find research information, both offline and online. We also had a high school group come for a visit, where we focused on research, report writing and referencing.

2. Facilitating strategic opportunities for professional development, collaboration and knowledge exchange.

A goal of our strategic plan is to provide opportunities to both staff and board members to meet with other libraries for professional development. One of the requirements for promotion is for the staff to complete two library related courses, one of which must be a cataloging course. Both library clerks completed their cataloging requirement and are looking at their next course for 2019.

Staff have been encouraged to attend workshops and small local conferences at the public libraries in Cranbrook or Nelson. One attended the summer reading club training in Cranbrook, while the other attended a children’s and teens programming workshop (CATS) at the Fernie Public Library. As well, a staff member attended a small STEM workshop at the Sparwood Public Library.

One problem we have with collaboration with other libraries is distance. Most workshops and conferences are a day’s drive away, which is cost prohibitive to a small library like us.

3. Supporting libraries in improving the digital literacy skills of users and staff so they can participate in an increasingly digital world.

Staff at the Elkford Public Library take this goal very seriously. They spend three or four hours a week helping patrons use the public computers to upload resumes, download government forms, or help contractors complete safety certificates so they can go to work at one of the local mine sites. Not only do the staff assist patrons, but they also troubleshoot errors and problems when the patron cannot get something to work. Staff also teach patrons how to use their cell phones, tablets and ereaders, or set up email accounts and update their computers. We also show people how to use their laptop computers.

LIBRARY PRIORITY 3 WORKING TOGETHER

1. Libraries provide British Columbians with diverse information, programs and services in their communities.

Since 2010, the Elkford Public Library has created a small community newspaper called the Focus. This newspaper is free to the community and is both an information source for small businesses and non-profit activities as well as a way for people to tell the community what they have done, or will be doing in the near future. We print about 400 copies a month, and they are shared amongst members of the community.

In the spring, our new staff began the serious work of programming. First we began a series of six week story times called Tales 4 Tots for the newest members of our community. Children from a few months old to those who are about to start kindergarten come for stories and songs on Thursday mornings. Parents are asked to stay, and we offer coffee and tea while they wait.
In the fall, we promoted a “Coffee Break” on Saturday afternoons that for the seniors in our community. We provide free coffee or tea and games and socialization for our elder community members. As the winter has progressed, we have had an increase in the average number of Saturday afternoon visitors to around ten, and they are not just seniors anymore. Seniors, children and families stop in on Saturday afternoons to play some games and have a cup of coffee, tea or hot chocolate. In the spring, once the weather becomes nicer, we will evaluate whether we want to continue over the summer, or keep this as a winter event.

We have also partnered with our local Youth Network, SYS.tem, by hosting their 3D printer. Teens are welcome to come to the library and use the printer. We are not large, but we did find a corner with a great computer for a teen area. A SYS.tem volunteer is available to help teach newcomers how the printer works. We also host a homework club, but have only had a couple of kids take advantage of this over the winter because the schools are quite far from the library.

2. Establishing a formal framework to engage in regular and ongoing dialogue with library partners.

In the fall, members of the board along with the library director went before our newly elected District Council to tell them what the library does. We discussed programming, from Tales 4 Tots to our seniors Coffee Break Saturdays. We discussed our options for ereaders and our value to the business needs of the community.

Then, we presented information about how important the public library is for poverty reduction in our community, by explaining that we help with resume writing, faxing, scanning and the local mine safety program certificates that contractors must complete before they can set foot on a mine site. We emphasized that we are a safe, non-judgemental space that provides free services to the entire community spectrum.

3. Exploring further opportunities across the wider library sector and with other jurisdictions to share best practices and realize cost-savings and other efficiencies.

This year, both staff and library board have made an effort to get out in the BC library community, by attending workshops, federation meetings, and webinars. We use our voice to make the needs of a small East Kootenay library known.

LIBRARY PRIORITY 4  ENHANCING GOVERNANCE

1. Continuing to encourage the use of strategic planning and reporting, including the use of community needs assessments.

As a new library director, the Elkford Public Library Strategic Plan has been vital in how I direct my work. I use it as a guideline to meet the needs of our library. During most board meetings, we discuss strategic plan items as it relates to library policy and staff hours.

This year, we met many of our strategic plan goals and even got a head start on the 2019 goals. The library board has been proactive in helping library staff to try more and learn more, providing advice, ideas and encouragement as we find our way.
The Elkford Public Library faced a major challenge in 2018, starting the year with completely new staff and an almost new library board in April. We met this challenge head on, using the new energy to work together for the best interests of our library and our community. With a new strategic plan in place, we created multiple programs, celebrating the differences of our community, library staff and board by trying new things, and learning how to make our little library work best for the particular needs of our community.